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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARAMARIBO 000586

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DEPT FOR WHA JROSHOLT, INR FOR BOB CARHART

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [NS](#) [ASEC](#)

SUBJECT: STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS: FAILED ACTION OR OMINOUS
SIGN?

REF: PARAMARIBO 176

Classified By: PolOff for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Protest demonstrations organized by the Youth Collective Suriname (JCS) continued on November 5 and marked the third time in less than a week that students took to the streets of Paramaribo, ostensibly to protest deficiencies in the educational system and other youth issues. Members of political parties in the governing coalition warned that the protests are orchestrated by the opposition National Democratic Party (NDP) with the ultimate aim of forcing the government to resign. Despite dwindling numbers of protesters with each action, and a lack of focus, the JCS said it will continue to call protests until its demands are met. Many fear opposition leader Desi Bouterse is behind the protests, and that the protests could be a sign of more desperate measures to come. This serves to underscore the real concern that Bouterse would resort to political instability, in order to prevent the start of his murder trial. END SUMMARY.

Unclear Goals

12. (U) When the Youth Collective Suriname (JCS) initially mobilized support for a protest demonstration on October 30, JCS Chairman Phil Hertzberg told the media that students needed to speak out for their rights and tell the Government what problems they are facing. The JCS asserted the Government needed a "wake-up call" regarding annual increases in University tuition fees, high unemployment rates, and structural problems in the education system. The JCS, however, introduced issues with no direct relation to the youth, such as the government's handling of the maritime boundary dispute between Suriname and Guyana. The demands of the protesters shifted depending on the day and which JCS leader was interviewed, ranging from a list with dozens of largely youth-oriented points to a vague demand the government pay attention to youth. While protests originally focused on demands of University students, few University students turned up at the protests, which were composed mostly of high school students. On November 7, the Student Association of the Anton de Kom University issued a press release expressing strong disapproval of the demonstrators, noting in particular the JCS's failure to engage the government in dialogue prior to taking to the streets. Minister of Education Edwin Wolf confirmed to media that the JCS had not contacted the ministry.

Dwindling Numbers

13. (U) On the first day of protests, October 30, approximately 350 people, mostly, but not exclusively students, participated in a peaceful march and delivered a petition to the National Assembly. A second peaceful march on November 2 drew an approximate 250 protesters and disbanded in the downtown area. A third action drew approximately 90 students on November 5 and had a different character - the protest leaders drove to selected schools in a van, jumped the fence at one school, and tried to rally students to leave the school and join the protest. The impact was limited - at only one high school did more than a handful of students leave the grounds with the protesters, and most of them went home rather than joining the march. A protest scheduled for November 1 was canceled in favor of a planning meeting for which only a handful of participants showed up, and another protest for November 6 never occurred. The next protest is scheduled for November 9.

Accusations of Political Meddling

14. (U) Suspicions of hidden agendas arose when it became clear that the protests were to be carried on past the first day (October 30), and when the JCS began to call for the Venetiaan Government to step down. Notable were also the signature military-period NDP-type slogans chanted by students, the purple shirts worn by some marchers (purple is the NDP color), and the accusation that NDP supporters brought water for the marchers. As a reaction, other youth organizations and members of the Youth Parliament pulled back their support. Governing coalition parliamentarian Sharmila Mangal-Mansaram revealed a JCS "master plan" she had obtained

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that reportedly called for increasing pressure over a three-day period beginning on October 30, with the goal of other sectors of society joining the youth by the third day in order to paralyze Paramaribo and force the government to pay attention - or to resign. Prominent community members have complained that any youth action should be non-partisan and not a veiled challenge to the system by a single political party. They claim the youth are being "used."

Bouterse,s Shadow

15. (SBU) Opposition leader and former military strongman Desi Bouterse and 24 co-defendants are scheduled to go on trial on November 30 for the murders of fifteen political opponents in December 1982. Bouterse suggested early in 2007 that he would disrupt the government rather than submit to the trial (reftel), and many fear the current protests are part of a Bouterse effort to destabilize Suriname. This is not the only ongoing protest - as of November 6, about 40 former military members had camped in a downtown park calling for speedy resolution to their demand that they receive government employment. Their spokesman joined the youth protest on November 5. A group of squatters demanding land rights has repeatedly threatened to occupy government offices. A group of Amerindians, who fought in the Interior War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was reported to "not rule out" closing down the major highway leading into the interior if their demands for compensation are not met. These two latter groups are not allied with the students.

What,s Next?

16. (C) Inspector Hendrik Setrosentono of the Surinamese Police seemed confident the protests were under control, and told Emboffs "not to worry." The police had a visible, calm, and mostly organized presence at the protests. The

international community is less optimistic. Dutch and French Embassy police liaison officers told us they are concerned the various protest groups could coalesce and create something more dangerous; in fact, the French told us they are evaluating their evacuation plans. Many Surinamers express an uneasy mix of nonchalance and worry. In the words of government policy advisor and political scholar Hans Lim A Po, "my fear is fires." In Paramaribo, with its many wooden buildings, fire has been a traditional weapon of destabilization, and Surinamers in the security community joined Lim A Po in his concern that (if Bouterse is behind the current sputtering protests) arson may follow.

17. (C) COMMENT The fear that Bouterse is behind the student protests serves to underscore the real concern that Bouterse would stop at nothing - including political instability - to prevent the start of his murder trial. Brick throwing or arson might discredit him or the protesters, but an inappropriate reaction by a nervous police force could be the spark that ignites neutral Surinamers to join the handful of discontented groups now on the streets. Nevertheless, for the moment, the student protests remain a failure - fewer students at each protest, no clear demands, public rebuke, and a failure to follow basic steps in their own "master plan." If the students are determined to make their mark and become more desperate to do so, any protest gone awry could be the spark Bouterse wishes for destabilization. END
COMMENT.
GENTON